

POSTMODERN MODERNITY, OR THE TRANSITION AS SPECTACLE

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1. ILLUSIONS AND OBLIVION

The Spanish democratic transition was one big Fiesta. The popular enthusiasm for the new freedoms was seen, heard and felt everywhere. There were enormous explosions of warmth and colour. Democratic values were raised to a level of mass exaltation. The whole country became the stage for a jubilee. But the political transition, and the social changes that characterised it, faced a number of complex dilemmas. It had to overcome an age-old backwardness that was bitterly etched into the widespread awareness of Spain's decadence. It also had to put an end to a deeply rooted isolation in intellectual and artistic values and in people's ways of life. And it had to undertake a rationalisation of economic and administrative structures, a transformation of culture, and not least, a reform of education, which Spanish intellectual revisionism had advocated, without much success, from the times of liberalism and regenerationism in the 19th century until the frustrated Republican experiences of the 20th. It was not only the recent history of brutal repression during the decades of military dictatorship that turned these issues into urgent problems. The weakness or exile that distinguish the reformist intellectual traditions of modern Spain, the ambivalence between traditionalism and modernisation that ran through Spanish thought in the 20th century, the very precariousness of a reform of thought in the

century of *les Lumières* – all of these factors highlighted the difficulties that Spain's past bequeathed to the future virtual changes of a belated and, in many respects, ambiguous democratisation.

The transition epoch can be broadly divided into periods. Its starting point was the only one possible: popular celebration, the explosion of joy that marked the start of post-Francoism. Probably all political transition processes that have succeeded dictatorships of a fascist or national-Catholic stamp, in Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula, have got under way through this kind of expansive initial period, often crowned by authentic orgies of collective enthusiasm and social imagination.

After the political euphoria of the post-Francoist transition, of the 'changeover,' there came, quite predictably, a period of profound democratic disillusionment. In the name of social stability or peace, political and moral alliances were formed with the institutions, the values and the most sinister representations of the recent authoritarian past. Their crimes were pardoned. Their myths and lies were covered up. Their violence was silenced. The pain that accompanied the memory of a bloody dictatorship from its beginnings until its very last days was erased in the name of the glories expected in an indefinite politico-economic future. A political slump in institutional continuity was sensed everywhere – as was the consequent atmosphere of moral retraction. The political and intellectual uncertainties that dogged the democratic transition crystallised in a failed *coup d'état* in 1981. Those were the years of so-called *pasotismo*, a true popular cultural current that broadly embraced the ethics of apathy and a kind of historical and social fatalism.

The noun *pasota* and its numerous verbal and adjectival variations were on everyone's lips in those times, particularly the younger generations. There were intellectuals classified as *pasotas*, and teenagers who *pasaban de todo*, who «couldn't care less» about anything. «Yo paso, tío» («I don't give a damn, man») became a true social formula throughout the country. This indolent phrase manifested, deep down, the social cult of an apathetic pessimism, an age-old tradition in the Catholic mentalities of the nation. And *pasotismo* was not only a sign of the popular culture. Two essays of the time also gave voice to this state of public and private ataraxy: *Nihilismo y acción* (*Nihilism and Action*) and *Un ensayo sobre Ciorán* (*An Essay on Ciorán*). Their young author, Fernando

Savater, outlined in them a lofty distancing from a critical tradition which, in Spanish culture, had only found expression in the form of a torpid Marxist-Leninist fundamentalism, deeply rooted in the scholastic tradition still predominant in the universities. In the name of a metaphysical pessimism, which dated back unconfessed to the Catholic 'tragic sense of life,' Savater furtively abandoned any consistent model of social and epistemological criticism to immediately embrace an individualism both traditionalistic and anarchic, closely related to the Quixotic idealism proclaimed by the nationalistic intellectuals of the late 19th century.

Beneath the spiritual constellation of the frantic rejoicing and the nihilistic theology of *pasotismo* there opened up the second stage of the Spanish transition: the spectacular decade of the 1980s. Politically, the dawn of this era was turbulent. The growing social apathy was crowned with the precarious gestures of a spiritually faltering democracy. Everywhere criticisms were voiced against a silent but firm authoritarian institutional continuity that surreptitiously linked the democratic right with the ranks and ideology of the Falange Española, the fascist party that had underpinned General Franco's military rebellion in 1936. But criticism was also aimed at a left wing that was quite prepared to prolong the political rituals inherited from that same past in the name of a progressivist elitism.

And beneath this constellation there appeared a series of essays, if not exactly interesting, then at least symptomatic. Essays that show, more than a theoretical concern for the new political and social vicissitudes, the intellectual longing for strong, charismatic power. The most important of them all is a work, once more, by Savater: *La tarea del héroe* (*The Task of the Hero*). It was closely followed by *Meditaciones sobre el poder* (*Meditations on Power*) by Eugenio Trías. Rafael Argullol stylised the romantic conception of the hero in his work *El héroe y el único* (*The Hero and the Unique*), and Xavier Rubert de Ventós expounded, in the same years, an impressionistic reformulation of an autarchic political power in his *Ensayos sobre el desorden* (*Essays on Disorder*).

None of these works discussed sociological problems in the strictest sense. Nor did they set out any kind of criticism of the recent authoritarian experience. They did not even suggest a review of half a century of predominant national-Catholic culture. There was no indication of a project for political or intellectual

renewal. What was in fact being constructed in these irregular essays, so celebrated at the time with numerous prizes and resounding applause, was a new political subject, substantial and charismatic, with elements borrowed from 19th-century European idealism, from Fichte to Stirner, spattered with a handful of romantic motifs, and solidly rooted in a Christianised version of Nietzsche's Superman. It could be said that, after the transitional stage of popular celebration, and following the descent into the inferno of disenchantment of the early years of real democracy, there resurged the promise of reborn political glory.

It was the resounding electoral victory of the Spanish left in 1982 that opened this third period: the heroic phase of the political transition, the age of the new mediatic exuberance of an emphatically postmodern Spain. There is no doubt at all that the factors that came into play in this new postmodern semantic field were complex. One of them was that very triumph of the Spanish socialists. Clamorous and compelling from all points of view, this victory sliced through a number of paradoxes at the same time. The left grasped the power of the State, which it had last held in the days of the Popular Front in the 1930s, at a time when its theoretical energy and its social project were exhausted on the international stage. With its political triumph, Spanish society promised itself a vast programme of true modernisation and democratisation, a change that extended from the working of the State to everyday ways of life. But none of this took into account any other intellectual articulation than the debris from the shipwreck of a dogmatic leftism, an intellectually fuzzy economic liberalism and an aesthetic avant-gardism of ostentatiously volatile traits. The era of Spain's institutional and cultural reform was dawning, following the dark night of fascism, without a healthy determination to criticise the country's authoritarian past, and without a clear concept of itself.

Very soon, after a brief post-election interval of applause and enthusiasm, there was a resurgence of that same progressively pessimistic view of the possibilities of Spanish democracy that had prevailed until 1982, but this time it was against the political strategies of a left wing comfortably ensconced in government. The criticisms were aimed at the charismatic, authoritarian high-handedness of the new administration, and at specific points of the new policy of gradually cutting back the promised institutional reforms.

Little by little, the social unrest turned against the same socialist elites who, from the Orteguian heights of sublime ruling minorities, toppled fatally into murky scandals of power abuse and corruption. Suddenly we woke up to the absence of a true programme of intellectual, institutional and social transformation of the old legacies of archaic, authoritarian, backward Spain. The past had not been reviewed, the educational institutions had not been reformed, and no autonomous space for intellectual criticism or scientific creation had been opened up.

2. POST-AVANTGARDISM AND SPECTACLE

In this climate characterised by disillusionment and pessimism, a prodigious and unexpected cultural awakening took place. On 15 March 1981, in response to a failed *coup d'état* that had much of Goya's nightmarish *Disparates* and not a little of Valle-Inclán's biting satirical plays, Javier Marías, a novelist who would go on to be one of the most publicised figures of new Spanish fiction, published an interesting article in the Madrid newspaper *El País*. His message, in effect, was that the threat of a coup must not interrupt the fun. «As long as it does not happen [a new coup] ... as long as this festivity lasts – a carnival, naturally, like all festivities – why not take advantage of it? Why not cheerfully think ... that the dance goes on?»

A new intellectual and aesthetic attitude had emerged at the dawn of a fragile transition, leaving behind the signs of social responsibility, of historical consciousness, and even of an intellectual concern for the project of the Spanish society of the future. The new intellectual posture, endorsed by the institutions and disseminated by the media, declared both critical reflection and reformist zeal to be either obsolete or accomplished. In their place it erected a strictly mediatic pose in tune with transnational post-modernism, summarily elevated to the rank of an antidote to leftist authoritarian messianism and the aesthetic of modernising salvation. Spain was, and had to be, a great party. The distinctive sign of the new politics was a *sui generis* hedonism, fully identified with the narcissistic values of mass consumption, and adorned with the vanguardist gesticulation of a recently-presented intellectual aristocracy. Its principle was the banality of the new, to

which the postmodern intelligentsia paid homage through the most varied expressions, from *nouvelle cuisine* to recyclings of the most banal post-avantgardes of New York's Soho. The *Movida* had been born.

Spanish modernity, whose project of a liberal reform of the country's culture and social institutions had run aground throughout the 19th century and a large part of the 20th under the unrelenting weight of authoritarian governments, and an unquestioned and unquestionable intellectual traditionalism, was now being redefined as the overcoming of politics amid the *fiesta*. The long-awaited political reforms were pushed aside by the performatisation of media events. Society's energy was volatilised in breathtaking electronic effects. The new intellectual stance replaced the independent critical conscience maintained under the repressive conditions of the national-Catholic dictatorship with a shiny new vanguardist identity, and even with the stage antics of the media entertainer. In the communications media, in youthful fiction and in social-democrat and neoliberal political discourse, this artist was stylised as a postmodern hero, nihilist consciousness, charismatic star and producer of aesthetic-political-commercial performances. The new cinema, the new popular novel, the new plastic avantgarde or the new architecture for the masses defined the reach of a fascinating culture that was simultaneously vanguardist and bureaucratic, and of the consequent cultural state as the manager of the national spectacle and its micronationalist replicas.

Catalonia enjoyed a splendid artistic tradition in this respect. Since the Modernist period, the Catalan vanguards of the early part of the century had left a deep imprint which national-Catholic traditionalism never succeeded in erasing entirely. But it was not the rigour of Gaudí's architecture and town planning or Espriu's poetry that Catalan nationalism extolled as the starting point of the new culture. The impassioned signs of the re nascent nationalism, Catholic, provincial and conservative, were adorned instead with gestures borrowed from the postmodernism of Las Vegas or Italian design, under the emblem of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, raised up as a national totem of an imported and *prêt-à-porter* artistic modernity.

Perhaps in this respect we should not overlook the historical figure of the Catalan fascist intellectual Eugeni d'Ors, whose aesthetic and political exaltation of the Baroque appeared, from the

postmodern perspective of the 1980s, to be an eclectic, anticipatory synthesis of moral traditionalism and aesthetic avant-gardism, political caciquism and patriarchal modernisation. Strictly speaking, Eugeni d'Ors, relatively well-known in art criticism circles for his newspaper articles on modern art, should have been praised as the spiritual grandfather of the contra-reformist concept of modernity implanted via the new Catalan aesthetic administration that embraced the Olympic mega-projects, together with the high-speed road systems, as conceptual axes of the new democratic culture. Dalí, the superlative, trivial genius who had outlined the aestheticist hybrid of Surrealism plus Nazism, who had exalted the dictator Franco as a model of the paranoico-critical politician – in a nutshell, the artist-entrepreneur *par excellence* – was likewise seen on this horizon as a true prophet of the era of the 'simulacra,' who had already announced his global concept and programme as early as 1929. Later Dada artists like Joan Brossa, and the final periods of painters like Miró and Tàpies, characterised by an empty ornamentalism, stood out as incarnations of an aesthetic modernity that was anyway arriving too late, and of an avant-garde that wantonly paraded its lack of critical intention.

In the name of this late-flowering, decadent vanguardist tradition there occurred precisely the contra-reformist revision of modernity as a systematic performatisation of a universe of aesthetic and political simulacra. In this regard, Rubert de Ventós, in his book *De la modernidad (On Modernity)*, published in 1980, outlined a cultural panorama that was confusing but symptomatic for that very reason. The Catalan writer declared obsolete the reformist criticism of society, comfortably confused with the leftist scholasticism that truly existed in the intellectual wastelands of Spain in both Francoist and post-Francoist times. In its place, Rubert was seduced by a trivial sensualism, a narcissistic subjectivism, and by a vague proposal of the transformation of reflexive experience into a random, floating perceptive effect: a programmatic intellectual impressionism and eclecticism. Rubert emphatically discarded the construction of meaning, in a clear affinity with the post-structuralist movements and their literary expression in the young Spanish narrative of the 1980s, of Muñoz Molina, Marías, Merino, Azúa and others. His philosophical goal was rather the fragmentary construction of a spectacular reality and a liberal principle of tolerance towards all things, as long as they were translated

into a sensualist rhetoric that tepidly imitated the most radical utopias of the 60s while forsaking their critical intentions.

The *Movida* was the multitudinary social expression of this individualism that was at the same time hedonistic and conservative, mercantile and vanguardist, progressive and archaic. It was, indeed, an ambiguous cultural movement, flexible and multifaceted, and for that very reason it largely resists precise definition. From an etymological point of view, this *Movida* is related with the term *Movimiento*, which insinuates some disturbing mythological associations. The *Movimiento* was the aesthetic and political category introduced into Europe by the leading fascist strategies of the 1920s and 30s. The futurist cult of the machine, of dynamism and violence, and the national-socialist campaigns of mass mobilisation of civil society with sights set on a war of expansion and extermination, are integral parts of this important historical concept, both aesthetic and military. *Movimiento* meant the displacement of human masses via the modern communications media, from the radio to heavy artillery, and also included their concentration, mobilisation and extermination to political and 'civilising' ends. The *Movimiento*, in the precisely modern sense in which the Spanish Falange adopted it from Italian fascism, was founded on an artistic and political concept of transformation and mobilisation of civil society, linked to the configuration of a totalitarian form of existence.

There is no need to reiterate that the Spanish *Movida* was a cheerful, confident movement, apparently a thousand leagues removed from that sinister European panorama of the first half of the century that culminated in the Second World War. The ethical values of the young Spanish literature of the 1980s, the joyous, banal art shows or the trivial film production cannot be compared with the magnitude or the gravity of the national-socialist utopia of total mobilisation of culture by the State. Likewise, its spectacular representation of an entertaining, tension-free Spanish modernity and a content-free democracy cannot be set on a par with the imposition of the national-Catholic forms of life defined by the Francoist elites in 1939. The *Movida* was a superficial cultural effect, not a total work of art. It identified itself entirely with a frivolous and corrupt showbusiness world, with a media strategy of comic gestures, and with social action understood strictly as merchandise and imitation. Its leading media fig-

ures wanted modernity as fiction and fictionalisation of reality, championed literature or philosophy conceived as fashionable commercial products, and adopted as their social doctrine narcissistic salvationism through design and spectacle.

But despite its banality, or perhaps precisely because of it, the *Movida* represented a true, radical transformation of Spanish culture like no other in the entire 20th century. It neutralised any imaginable form of social criticism and historical reflection. It introduced, in the name of an obscure lucidity, a morality of generalised cynicism. Its mercantilist opportunism, inextricably linked with an aesthetic of triviality, finally disgorged itself into a political praxis understood as 'communicative action': a synthesis of depoliticisation of society and aestheticisation of politics. The *Movida* staged a social action understood as the design, exhibition and dissemination of a totally performatised and administrated culture: the spectacle of postmodernity.

Yet it could be said that the *Movida* culminated the cultural transformation started by the *Movimiento*: it demolished the few pillars of independent sensibility that national-Catholicism had left standing, it fulminated intellectual and artistic dissidence from inside itself, and it transformed Spanish culture, in many aspects so pre-modern and anti-modern, with a deep-rooted tradition of intolerance and authoritarianism, into a bazaar of philosopher-journalists and a fair of multimedia operettas, under the sign of a generalised post-vanguardist transmutation of art into a hypermarket.¹

Alongside this spectacular dimension, and together with the gestures of its mediatic heroism, the *Movida* also embraced the expressions of social disenchantment in the face of the limits and conflicts that burdened the recently-installed democracy. In pop music and comics, its artists and intellectuals voiced the reactions of the degraded social groups generated by unemployment, the social climate of corruption and the mass consumption of hard drugs. But these sporadic signs of protest were finally diluted in an eclecticist sea of signs, currents or discourses, consumed and consummated. The *Movida* linked the worn-out slogans of the 1960s' sexual revolution with the changes in sex relationships

¹ Pedro Pérez del Solar, «Vidas ejemplares. Algunas aproximaciones desde la historieta a la modernidad de los ochenta,» and Rafael Lamas, «El cine de Almodóvar como zarzuela postmoderna,» in Eduardo Subirats (ed.). *Intransiciones. Crítica de la cultura española*, pp. 37 and ff.

caused by the emergence of AIDS, combined a vitalism of Nietzschean inspiration with the values of consumerism, and saw no problem in embracing at the same time an everyday *sui generis* anarchism with unconditional support for a conservative political establishment.

It was the new Spanish cinema, and very especially Pedro Almodóvar's work, that conferred on the *Movida* a massive social seal and disseminated its intellectual eclecticism, its spectacular concept of modernity and its moral cynicism in an international setting. And it has been precisely the international critics who have celebrated Almodóvar's films with the greatest fervour for their original introduction of everyday themes, from homosexuality to feminism, traditionally taboo subjects for Catholic censorship. Almodóvar has also designed a sophisticated multiculturalist semiotic, clearly differentiated from the provincialism of the Spanish cinema of the Franco years. But from a cultural and historical point of view, the importance of Almodóvar's work resides primarily in the fact that it fluidly knit together the values of traditional Spain with the gesticulation of a freakish modernity, at the same time endowed with grotesque elements related to the popular tradition of the 19th-century *zarzuela* or popular operetta. In his films, the aesthetic of TV commercials joined hands with the traditional melodrama of Madrid's variety theatres. His comedies, revolving around an everyday life freed of the prejudices and taboos of authoritarian Catholic Spain, were at the same time shot through by the deep-seated mythological values of that same repressive tradition. Almodóvar's films insisted on a pathetically stereotyped humour, on fussy depictions of a degraded and therefore rhetorically exaggerated sexuality, while at the same time reiterating certain clichés of the traditionalist melodrama of a painter like Solana or a novelist like Cela, to cite just a couple of deplorable examples.

We could add one more comment on the subtle eroticism of transvestism, a central feature in all of Almodóvar's films. The aesthetic of sexual transvestism and transexualisation is undeniably linked to the vanguardist and post-vanguardist conception of culture as artefact and construction, as simulacrum and hyperreality. But it is forgotten that a virtual sex scandal can conceal a solid virtuous morality. It was undoubtedly an obscene virtue. The same virtuous obscenity that, ultimately, distinguishes the iconography of Baroque

Christianity, with its perverse fantasies of martyred saints, the ambiguous eroticism of Christ's wounds and the lascivious chasteness of images of the Virgin Mary dressed as Islamic and Jewish brides.

Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (*Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown*) is the spectacle of a new tolerance in everyday Spanish customs that neglects to question its precarious, repressive patriarchal legacies. Its central and secondary characters manifest the signs of an eclectic liberation defined at the same time by the miniskirts of the 1970s, the deceptions and fictions of the Latin American *bolero* ballad, the new Madrid school of design copied from the international magazines, and a traditional confusion of romantic intrigues and professional corruption. The theatrical atmosphere that distinguishes this film as a true orgy of the emancipation of signs fails to prevent its female leads from finally playing the traditionalist role of the humiliated and abandoned woman, the *mater dolorosa*, and its male protagonists from behaving as fools (that is, assuming degradation to a grotesque existence as true liberation, following a picaresque tradition whose roots strike deep down into the Spain of the Inquisition).

Spanish fiction writing of these years has traced paths that are in many ways parallel. Juan Benet and Eduardo Mendoza represent two extreme and opposed landmarks that are nevertheless underpinned by the same concept of fiction and of fictionalisation of the real. Benet's narrative has been labelled with the somewhat scattershot term of 'marvellous realism.' His meticulous, hyperrealistic descriptions were compared by Pere Gimferrer with the method of the scrupulous scientist or even of the essayist philosopher. Truly, Benet's objectivist and objectifying prose leads us, for instance in *Herrumbrosas lanzas* (*Rusty Lances*), into a transparent universe of microscopic hyperrealities: microrealistic descriptions of geographical places, social microsituations, military strategies and tactics mapped out to the most absurdly tiny detail. But the rhetorical result of this formalistic and hyperrealistic option is a narrative style that is confused and sometimes unnecessarily complex, anti-economical and gratuitously sophisticated. It is fiction for fiction's sake. Fiction as entertainment. Fiction even attributed, by Benet himself, to boredom and indifference. And yet under a form that combines hyperreality with cynicism, the novel eluded a pending question that until then had only been debated in Spanish literature in exile, from Juan Ramón S  nder to Juan

Goytisolo: the Civil War and the violent implantation of the national-Catholic way of life in the Iberian Peninsula.

I want to underline here the importance of fiction in the 1980s with regard to the social dimension, or, more specifically, the mediatic and political dimension it legitimised. Mendoza's novel *La ciudad de los prodigios* (*The City of Marvels*) provided a paradigmatic model in this respect. In it we find a constellation that epistemologically and politically complements the one that pervades Benet's novel. But it is not the marvellous aesthetic of a micro-analytical hyperrealism. Mendoza's literary goal was not to eliminate historical experience in the name of a fictitious reality or a marvellous hyperreality. On the contrary, *The City of Marvels* appears to be a rigorously historical novel, filled with transparent social and individual situations of a rigorous realism. The fictionalisation of the real does not affect its traditional novelistic form nor alter its everyday language. It is not an epistemological *parti pris*, in contrast with Benet's aesthetic. The marvellous-real, the hyperreal, constitutes rather its contents, or to put it still more coarsely, its literary moral, its politico-moral message. This novel, which in its day was a resounding best-seller, describes the history of a real city throughout an objective historical period and by way of realistically plausible characters. And yet this city, Barcelona, is presented throughout a ritual evolution towards a kind of hyperreal glory, or more exactly, towards a mediatic transfiguration that opens the city up to a sublime explosion of ecstatic appearances: the city as a great Baroque theatre, or a glorious post-modern spectacle. Mendoza foresaw, with a vision between ironic and legitimising, the architectural and electronic fiction of the Barcelona 1992 Olympics and the national pageants that surrounded them.

Between the narrative celebration of culture as a spectacle and the literary liquidation of historical memory, the Spanish novel of those years traced the profiles of a new end-of-century awareness. In this sense, Antonio Muñoz Molina or Javier Marías painted an interesting documentary tableau of Spanish life in those years, through a series of common characters whose central trait was their contamination of unreality: beings defined by apathy and tedium, an emphatic inner hollowness and an insistent moral relativism, individuals who revel melodramatically in the confusion of signs of a false cosmopolitanism or an often pitiful fascination

for the 'big city,' pervaded by the most typical clichés of the stimulants and excitants offered by late-modern consumerism, the seduction of a clumsily exaggerated chaos and irrationality, and an insidious cult of the ephemeral.

The aesthetics and politics of the spectacle found an excellent political and mediatic channel of expression in the architecture of these years. And the Spanish architecture of the 1980s was also one of its cultural expressions that aroused the greatest international repercussion. Ricardo Bofill traced the synthesis of a technological modernity and a traditionalist iconography, lavishly adorned with classicist and Mediterranean motifs. In some of his projects, like Barcelona airport, this synthesis swells out profusely in a mannerist rhetoric that has few worries about sacrificing functionality. In other cases, like Málaga airport, what he presents is rather a simple but obsessive monumentality, whose classicist rhetorical moments explicitly emulate the grandiloquence of the architectural *kitsch* of the Franco or Perón regimes of the 1950s.

This same heroic monumentality, together with an emblematic, empty historicism, is also seen in what was one of Rafael Moneo's most celebrated projects in its day, his Archaeological Museum in Mérida. Here, the dream of building a magnificent Roman baths complex shatters any architectural consonance with the delicate ruins of the moderately-sized acropolis that surround it. Moreover, Moneo's Museum does not establish the slightest dialogue with the degraded urban setting in which it stands: it is simply incrustated into its fabric, without the slightest reflexive distance from it or the slightest spatial concession to the obligatory public uses of a museum, from car parks to seats or benches. Its overblown dimensions scorn the functionality of a space intended simply to display an archaeological collection of modest proportions. The result is a vast inner emptiness, a rhetorically forced monumentality, a false space.

This Archaeological Museum of Mérida appears to use brick as its building material, representing a pleasing connection with the craft traditions of popular Spanish architecture and a friendly gesture of dialogue with the rustic materials of the ruins themselves. A closer look, however, reveals that this is not the case. The brick is merely a coating, used with the same versatility as in the historicist aesthetic of late-modern shopping malls. Rhetorically added to the concrete structure, these bricks totally disqualify the

label of 'critical regionalism' that was applied to the work in its day. What we see instead is a regionalistic mannerism, as inconsistent from an artistic perspective as from the constructive point of view: and indeed, the bricks have not ceased to fall off the façades throughout the few years of the building's life.

All of these essays, novels and architectural works contribute to painting a notable aesthetic-political portrait of the Spanish society of the 1980s: literary simulacra of magical realism, monumental architectural stage sets, suppression of historical memory, transvestment of repressive ways of life, neutralisation of the autonomous subject of a reflexive and exemplary experience of reality, mediatic aestheticisation of democracy as a spectacle. The aesthetics of transvestism elevated by Almodóvar's films to a national identity, or the exaltation of a falsified historical memory in the architectural and electronic events of the Fifth Centenary of the 'Discovery' of America, are the politico-cultural happenings that close this fascinating circle of deceptions. And perhaps we should even add something more. They point up the paradox of a culture that in many aspects was pre-modern, that suddenly embraced the neo-Baroque project of literary, architectural or political fictionalisation of a miraculously consummated modernity: the marvellous paradox of a postmodern modernisation.

3. THE EROTICISM OF DISGUISE

The modernising strategies that were implanted during the post-dictatorial transitions in Spain and Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s are, to say the least, ambiguous. In Spain, in particular, they were defined by the administered consensus of a political oratory that did not affect the deepest essences of Hispanic anachronism, and a literary, philosophical and artistic production of a commercial and therefore trivialising nature. These cultures are historically distinguished by an underdevelopment which can in no way be limited to certain political conjunctures or solely to economic and technological categories. Backwardness is above all a moral and intellectual condition. Hispanic underdevelopment has its roots in the precariousness of its enlightened liberal traditions and the Catholic resistance to the modern philosophical, scientific and social revolutions. Since the 19th century,

modernity has adopted in this geopolitical sphere the character of a belated promise of making up the lost time of a techno-scientific progress never truly embraced with regard to its ethical and epistemological principles. And in the last decades of the 20th century this modernity has been recodified as a transcendental realm of political and cultural simulacra. Its foundations have been the carnivalisation of democracy, the aestheticisation of politics as showbusiness for the media, the configuration of a cultural State as fiction, the domestication of the artistic and intellectual avant-gardes, and their volatilisation as politically manipulated performance. But all that was achieved under the postmodern banner of cultural pastiche and recycling was intellectual apathy, the abandonment of any renovation projects, and the generalised disarticulation of social subjects and discourses: Spain's postmodern modernisation intellectually crystallised as an aesthetic of the desertion and absolution of criticism.

Strictly speaking, Spanish culture has not experienced the end of metaphysics, is unfamiliar with the configurating principle of the critical traditions of enlightened positivist thought, has shaky liberal traditions, and has not assumed the social and artistic experience of the avant-gardes in any true sense. Instead of confronting this real past and accepting both its differences and its historical limitations, 1980s Spain celebrated a collective forgetting of this past, to blithely and brazenly abandon itself to the excesses of a hyperreal modernity of electronic orgies and bureaucratic multimedia events. The aestheticisation of transitional politics celebrated its apotheosis in the Great Hispanic Happening of 1992, the Spanish *Parallelaktion*, namely the *Fifth Centenary* of the founding of the Catholic Nation. The festival that was 1992 was a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total art work, or rather the great political synthesis of *zarzuela* and high-tech spectacles, which embraced breathtaking architecture, the narratives of regionalistic and nationalistic falsification of history, and the fictionalisation of a politics now converted to the production of illusions for the consumption of the recently-constituted transitional electronic masses.

This cultural landscape of the century's end allows for two different and opposed conclusions. One of them is pitiful. During the 1990s, the end of the great Spanish postmodern party has revealed its most putrid face: corruption, institutional involution, a national landscape of desolation and apathy. The spectacle, in a word,

of a continuing Spanish decadence. The unmitigated triumph of spectacular modernisation has not opened the doors to a rigorous reformation of a social project. The intelligentsia installed in the centres of information and dissemination of knowledge have closed ranks against a sorely-needed criticism and revision of the immediate past. The new elites, which in any case are 'the same old monkeys in new clothes,' as the Spanish saying goes, have covered up the laughable would-be 'modern' fictions of the 1980s with a new archaic, nationalistic fictionalisation of the unity and indissolubility of Spain. This new 'party' began with hesitant steps at the beginning of the 1990s. At the turn of the century its vigour has expressed itself in a sudden transfiguration from the pallid Europeanist dream into a chimerical Atlantic and global imperial projection. It has all been a deceit. The mediatic fragmentation of our social experience has camouflaged the old traditionalism behind a new, diffuse, polysemic face. Spanish postmodernity subsists without a clear concept of itself as a project for redesigning the spectacle in a culture of precarious critical traditions. The old conceptions of Spain as 'essential' and 'unique' are banalised under the formats of electronic consumption. The rituals of the agonising 'deep' Spain are retransmitted under the delirious signs of more or less exacerbated micronationalisms. The country's scientific and technological backwardness is dressed up in folkloristic complacencies about the healthy state of the language and a thousand superfluous literary prizes. Behind the micronational and macropolitical populist façades, the authoritarian rites of a comfortably-established mediocrity are rehearsed and performed to shameless ovations and hypocritical applause...

Behind these wobbly fanfares of the postmodern and pre-post-modern *fiesta* and its miserable politico-cultural legacy, the other scene unfolds: the story of a marginalised Spain that speaks from a historical exile and from new interior and exterior exiles of present-day society. These are the voices that know about Spain's age-old backwardness, voices that have dared to make critical analyses of the uncertainties of modern rationality. They are the voices of resistance against the rancid tradition the country has inherited. The true intellectual and artistic conscience of transitional Spain. The project leaders of a reform that remains to be accomplished.